Ramadan and Fasting

Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar, can be 29 or 30 days long. An Islamic month begins with the sighting of the new crescent in the western horizon, immediately after sunset. Muslims look toward the western horizon for the
new moon on the 29th day of Sha'ban, the eighth month. If the new moon is sighted, Ramadan has begun with the sunset but fasting begins with the next dawn. If the new moon is not sighted on this 29th day, Muslims complete 30 days of Sha'ban (the previous month) and Ramadan begins the following day.

The Significance of Ramadan and Fasting

God says in the Quran:
"O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed for you, even as it was prescribed for those before you, that you may attain God-consciousness." (Quran 2:183)
"The month of Ramadan in which was revealed the Quran, a guidance for humankind and clear proofs for the guidance and the criterion. So whoever of you sights (the crescent on the first night of) the month (of Ramadan) must observe the fasts that month, and whoever is ill or on a journey, the same number from other days. God intends for you ease, and He does not want for you difficulty. (So you) must complete the same number, and that you must magnify God for having guided you so that you may be grateful to Him." (2:185)

Accordingly, the month of Ramadan is called the month of the Quran. Therefore, Muslims recite the Quran frequently in this month.

Sawm or Fasting

Sawm (fasting) begins with dawn and ends with sunset. Muslims rise before dawn, eat Sahur (pre-dawn meal) and drink an adequate amount of liquids for the preparation of sawm. Eating and drinking stops at dawn. During the day no eating, drinking or sexualas failure can violate the requirements of fasting.

Fasting in the month of Ramadan is an act of worship required of all Muslims who have attained puberty. Women who are having their menstrual period or who have not fully recovered from childbirth postpone the fast until they are completely out of their given conditions. In addition, those who are ill or on travel may choose to postpone their fast.

Muslims fast because God has commanded them to do so. However, they may also think about the benefits of fasting that include developing control over hunger, thirst and sexual urges, training to be a good moral person and testing sincerity to the Creator. During the fast,

Muslims may conduct their business as usual.

The fast is broken immediately after sunset usually by eating dates and drinking water or juice. However, any lawful food or drink may be used to break the fast. This is followed by the Maghrib salah (after sunset prayer) which is followed by a complete meal. After a brief rest, Muslims go to the mosque to offer the 'Isha salah (night prayer) and then a special night prayer, called taraweeh.

Taraweeh

This nightly congregational salah (prayer) is performed after the regular night prayer. Traditionally, a Hafiz of the Quran, - a person who has memorized the whole Quran (in Arabic) - leads the prayer. He recites the Quran in small portions, in proper sequence, every night and completes the recitation of the whole Quran before the end of the month of Ramadan. Every Muslim who attends such prayers regularly gets the opportunity of listening to the recitation of the whole Quran by the end of the month. If a Hafiz of the Quran is not available, the Muslim who has memorized the most in the group leads the prayer and recites according to his ability. Many Islamic scholars cite the Sunnah (path of the Prophet Muhammad) of the Prophet - may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him - that he always prayed during the night alone at his home whether it was Ramadan or not and same was the habit of many of his great companions.

Ramadan Generosity

The month of Ramadan brings many blessings multiplied for those who do good.
During this month people are more generous, more cordial, friendlier and more ready than other times of the year to do good deeds. The poor and the needy receive food, clothing and money from the well-off in the community. Many people go to the mosque in the neighborhood for fast-breaking and meals. People in the neighborhood send fruit, food and drinks to the mosque - the atmosphere is that of a friendly dinner every evening of the month.

Well-known contributors of the Muslim community find themselves surrounded by the needy people for donations. Zakat, a wealth purifying alms, and donations are given at this time of the year since many Muslims wish to take the opportunity of multiplied rewards from God.

Laylat al-Qadr

This is the night of the *Qadr*. The term *Al-Qadr* has been frequently translated as "the power". A better translation may be "the value" or "the decree" because God says the value of this night is greater than one thousand months, a lifetime of over
eighty-three years! God sends His decrees in this night. This is the night when the Quran was first revealed at the time of Prophet Muhammad. God says in the Quran:

"We have indeed revealed this (the Quran) in the Night of Value (or

Measure). And what will explain to you what the Night of Value is? The Night of Value is better than a thousand months. Therein come down angels and the Spirit (the angel Gabriel) by God's permission with all decrees. (That night is) Peace until the rising of the dawn." (Quran 97:1-5)

The Night of Decree is a gift to mankind from God. However, it is not clear which night is *Laylat al-Qadr*. Some reports by companions of the Prophet allude it to be the 27th night of the month of Ramadan, but many more sayings point to any of the odd date nights during the last third of the month of Ramadan. According to authentic teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, Muslims are advised to spend the 21st, 23rd, 25th, 27th and 29th nights of Ramadan in worship and doing good works to assure finding *Laylat al-Qadr*. A portion of Muslims stay up all night in prayers and good works, however, the Prophet and his companions used to sleep at least one-third of the night.

In some Muslim countries, the 27th of Ramadan is a holiday to enable people to rest during the day after all night of worship.[1] Schools are closed from the 27th of Ramadan through the 2nd of Shawwal (5 to 6 days) to combine *Laylat al-Qadr* and *Eid al-Fitr* (An Islamic celebration that starts with the end of Ramadan) observances.

I'tekaf or Seclusion

The practice of the Prophet Muhammad was to spend the last ten days and nights of Ramadan in a mosque. Following his practice, it is considered, an act of worship for someone to go in seclusion in a neighborhood *mosque*. People in seclusion spend their time in various forms of *dhikr* (remembrance of God), such as performing extra prayers, recitation and study of the Quran, study of the Hadith (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), and exhorting each other to be good through obeying God and His Messenger. Since people in seclusion are not permitted to go outside the mosque except for emergencies, they sleep in the mosque and use available facilities at the mosque.

The food for the people in seclusion is provided either by their own families or people in the community. Seclusion ends, generally, at the declaration of sighting of the moon or at the end of the month of Ramadan. For busy people a shorter version of seclusion is allowed, such as one night, one day or a few days.

Sadaqat al-Fitr

In general, any material help extended to the poor, needy and to those who ask and deserve so is called *Sadaqah*. *Sadaqat al-Fitr*, which is also called *Zakat al-Fitr*, is the obligatory material help extended to the poor of the society before the Eid prayers, preferably to be given early enough for the poor to prepare for the celebration. In North America, the estimated amount of $5 to $8 worth of staple food (such as rice) is to be given on behalf of each member of the donor's family, including infants.

Eid al-Fitr

The end of the fasting month is celebrated on the first of Shawwal, the 10th month, which follows Ramadan. On the 29th of Ramadan after sunset, people go out in the open looking for a new crescent in the western horizon where the sun sets. If the crescent is sighted, the end of Ramadan is declared. If the crescent is not sighted, Ramadan is extended by one day.

On the day of Eid, people take a bath or shower in the early morning, eat breakfast, wear their best clothes, use perfume and proceed to the place of Eid congregation while pronouncing *takbeerat*, saying, "God is the Greatest, there is no deity but God and all praise belongs to God." Muslims pronounce *takbeerat* in their homes, in the street and at the place of congregation while waiting for the leader, the *Imam*. It was the practice of the Prophet Muhammad to hold Eid prayer congregations in open grounds. Following the practice of the Prophet Muslims are advised to hold Eid prayers in open grounds. In Muslim countries with warm climate there are designated Eid prayer grounds. However, in North America Muslims rent halls at convention centers or major hotels.

The *Imam* leads the prayers at the appointed time, and then delivers a sermon. At the end of the sermon, people supplicate, greet, embrace and congratulate each other for the successful completion of Ramadan and ask God for the acceptance of their efforts in His obedience.

During the day, people visit each other and children receive gifts. In some countries, people go for picnics and other gatherings. Eid celebrations may be arranged at work or at any social settings. Essentially, Eid is a day of thanks to God and a day of meeting family and friends.

Umrah, or Minor Hajj, in Ramadan

There is a report from Prophet Muhammad saying that performing Umrah in the month of Ramadan is equal to performing a major or complete Hajj. Hajj is the pilgrimage to Mecca. Hajj is the enactment of some of the trials and tribulations of Prophet Abraham (peace be upon him), his wife Hagar and his oldest son, Ishmael. Complete Hajj lasts for five days but Umrah is completed in a couple of hours. Umrah is only a small part of the Hajj. An animal sacrifice may be offered at the completion of Umrah. Umrah may be performed anytime during the year but it has special significance in the month of Ramadan.